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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: FATIMA ZAHRA MOSQUE AWAITS ITS FATE

Classified By: ADCM TERRY DAVIDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (U) The Fatima Zahra mosque located in the Yeni Guneshli area of Baku's Surakhani District remains closed, and its construction is frozen amid press reporting and statements by religious officials criticizing the potential destruction of the mosque.

¶2. (C) In early February 2010, Poloff and LES went to see the mosque, which sits on a large plot of land estimated at five acres on a hillside with stunning views of the Baku skyline. The basic stone structure of the mosque is complete, but the inside remains unfinished (as seen from outside the walls of the complex), with building materials strewn about the area. There were two raggedly dressed "guards" sitting in a hut behind a dilapidated wall and gate, who sidestepped substantive questions about the status of the mosque by citing their lowly status as guards. The phone number that the guards gave to LES for the head of the community matched the number post had already tried to call several times without success. On this occasion, the head of the community claimed to be heading to a meeting with the Presidential Administration. In the following days, post again placed a call to the head of the community. On this occasion, the community leader said that he saw no point in meeting with the USG.

¶3. (SBU) According to local press reports, the mosque was originally built from 1992 to 1996; the Baku mayor's office in 2002 decided to demolish the mosque but never carried out such plans. The head of the Caucasus Muslim Board, Sheikh Allashukur Pashazade, has publicly spoken against the destruction of the mosque. Forum 18 reported on 22 December 2009 that the lawyer for the community feared that the authorities were making preparations to destroy the mosque. Having lost their case at the Baku Appeals Court, members of the community expressed intent to push their case to the Supreme Court. As of late February 2010, there were no additional updates on the legal status of the case.

¶4. (C) Comment: The hesitation of the head of the community to meet with USG officials may well indicate that he believes that whatever advocacy might come of recruiting the USG to the community's corner might not be worth drawing the ire of the Azerbaijani government. In terms of the mosque itself, Poloff noted the size and location of the space around the mosque: it sits at the center of the community, surrounded by serviceable roads, and with a terrific view of the city center, waterfront and nearby hillsides. Though it is conjecture at this point, Embassy is inclined to believe that the issue of ownership of valuable commercial property overshadows the motive to suppress religious expression. End Comment.

